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**AN ELUSIVE MANUSCRIPT OF SCOTT'S HOUSE OF ASPEN AT THE
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND**

Walter Scott's first full-length work as an author in his own right was The House of Aspen, a dramatic re-working of material from Leonhard Wächter's (pseud: Veit Weber) 1795 dialogical novel Die heilige Vehme. Scott's play was eventually published in The Keepsake in 1829, although he had composed it in 1799-1800 at the tail end of his 'German-mad' phase.¹ In the 'Advertisement' preceding the printed text of the play in 1829, Scott writes that 'there are in existence so many manuscript copies of the following play' that he has decided to publish it now before a posthumous publication can threaten to do him any injustice.² We know for certain that John Kemble and George Ellis received copies of The House of Aspen in 1800 and 1801 respectively. Yet research thus far has discovered very few manuscripts of the play; the two held in Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (in GEN MSS 266) would seem to be the two widely known, verified sources. In 1969 Arthur

¹ Walter Scott to Mrs Hughes, Edinburgh, 13 December 1827, in The Letters of Sir Walter Scott in 12 vols, ed. Herbert Grierson (London, 1932-37), X, 330-34 (331).

² Walter Scott, The House of Aspen, in The Keepsake for MDCCCXXX, ed. Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London, 1829), 1-66 (2).

Melville Clark claims to have had access to a manuscript of The House of Aspen dated 1809 (i.e. nine to ten years after its initial composition) with the alternative title The Mother and the Son; yet the whereabouts of this manuscript are unknown.³

The House of Aspen is Scott's first attempt to implement what he had learned from reading and translating German plays in 1796-98; finding an original manuscript of it is important in gaining a first-hand impression of the effects of these experiences on the beginnings of Scott's literary career. The two manuscripts held at the Beinecke, both entitled The House of Aspen. A tragedy founded upon a German Story, offer many indications that they are early, if not original, drafts of the play. Despite not being in Scott's hand, the manuscript of GEN MSS 266 volume 3 is written on paper with a 1799 watermark; and although the first four acts are in the hand of an amanuensis, the manuscript of volume 2 contains a number of Scott's corrections and emendations.

The National Library of Scotland holds a manuscript of The House of Aspen, acquired at auction in New York in 1999 to the tune of £11,500, now shelved with the call number 'Acc. 11772'. The first ten pages – including the title page and the list of dramatis personae – of this 83-page text, are in Scott's handwriting, with the rest of the play copied by the same amanuensis responsible for transcribing the Beinecke manuscripts. The auctioneer's catalogue makes some bold claims about this item: it is

³ Arthur Melville Clark, Sir Walter Scott: The Formative Years (Edinburgh and London, 1969), 278-79n109. A lack of detailed textual history has limited what scholars can say about Scott's stages of work on his play. The discussion in Fiona Robertson's Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction (Oxford, 1994), 235 makes no pretence at a consideration of manuscripts of the play, but refers to the details of the manuscript mentioned by Clark.

‘a previously unknown manuscript’, ‘completely unrecorded’, and from 1799-1800.⁴

The first two claims are entirely correct. But the third is harder to prove. The title page might offer some help. It reads: ‘The House of Aspen. A Drama of Chivalry founded Upon a German Story. 1800.’ ‘1800’ suggests a date of completion for the present manuscript. This would be wholly consistent with Scott’s practice of dating completed manuscripts around this time: his three unpublished translations of German plays each give the date ‘1796’, ‘1796-7’, and ‘1797’ on the title page.⁵ While ‘1800’ in Acc.

11772 is not in the handwriting of the amanuensis who completed the majority of the transcription, it is also not in Scott’s cursive script; it may well have been added in hindsight. By contrast, a completion date is not given on the Beinecke manuscripts. Furthermore, while the Beinecke’s GEN MSS 266 vol. 3 has a watermark of 1799 and vol. 2 has no indication of a date, the entirety of the NLS’s Acc. 11772 is written on paper watermarked 1798. At a first glance, this earlier watermark suggests earlier work. But, as Peter Garside has demonstrated, Scott was no stranger to using old paper for writing new things: rather than giving a definitive start date, therefore, ‘a watermark offers only a terminus a quo in dating the year of composition.’⁶

Circumstantial evidence, however, helps to provide a window of probability for the date of Acc. 11772. Jotted on the front end paper of the binding is: ‘Charlotte Maria from Walter Scott’. The ‘Charlotte Maria’ in question is Lady Charlotte Susan Maria

⁴ An original of the auction catalogue is unavailable, but an excerpt from it, pertaining to this item (lot 140), has been reproduced and is kept with the manuscript in the NLS.

⁵ See MS Abbotsford Library – N.3.10, 1 and 61; and MS Abbotsford Library – N.3.11, 1.

⁶ Peter Garside, ‘Popular Fiction and National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott’s *Waverley*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, xlvii (1991), 30-53 (34).

Bury (née Campbell), with whom Scott had been close friends since at least 1798: according to the Dictionary of National Biography, Scott first met Matthew Gregory Lewis at one of Charlotte Maria's parties in Edinburgh. He and Charlotte Campbell went on to become close acquaintances at this time. In 1802, for example, Scott gives a flavour of the conviviality of this friendship, noting that Lord and Lady Campbell visited him unannounced one evening to 'scramble for bread and Cheese [...] between reading[,] reciting and music'.⁷ Scott was also to include Charlotte Maria in his list of recipients of the first press of the Minstrelsy in 1803.⁸ We have no record that Scott sent a copy to Charlotte Maria nor that she acknowledged receiving it; but we are justified in maintaining that he gave it to her by hand when their friendship was at its closest between 1798 and 1803, and certainly before 1809, when she ceased making regular visits to Edinburgh after her first husband's death.

All in all, NLS Acc. 11772 is a fairly clean copy, and there are only a few corrections by Scott. Indeed, with two noteworthy exceptions and a number of subtle changes to individual words, it is almost identical to the version of The House of Aspen that ends up published in 1829. This, too, makes dating it difficult. Beinecke GEN MSS 266 vol. 2 contains a number of corrections and emendations to the amanuensis's work in Scott's hand, which are however present in Acc. 11772. The NLS's manuscript might therefore seem to be a cleaned up draft, further on in the process of writing this play. But in all other respects, the first four acts of the Beinecke GEN MSS 266 vol. 2 manuscript are textually and orthographically identical to what ended up being printed

⁷ Walter Scott to Lady Anne Hamilton, Edinburgh, 1 February 1802, in Letters, I, 129-32 (130).

⁸ See Walter Scott to James Ballantyne, London, 21 April 1803, in Letters, I, 182-83 (183).

in 1829; Scott's additions to this manuscript are, therefore, corrections to copying errors on the part of his amanuensis. Between these two drafts, The House of Aspen also undergoes a change in generic description: the Beinecke's manuscripts both subtitle the play 'A tragedy', whereas Acc. 11772 is 'A Drama of Chivalry'. This is a subtitle that Scott did not see amongst the German plays we know him to have read, and even by 1800, 'Ritterstück', 'Ritterschauspiel', and similar subtitles with the prefix 'Ritter-' were only used for less than one fifth of the glut of chivalric plays that had been published and performed in the German-speaking world since 1773.⁹ Notably, Scott bestows this subtitle on his 1797 translation of Jacob Maier's Fust von Stromberg (subtitled 'Ein Schauspiel', i.e. 'a play' in the original) and the handwriting in which Scott writes 'A Drama of Chivalry' is identical across these two manuscripts.

Criticism over the years has often taken whatever opportunity it can to pick Scott up on his inadequate grasp of the German language.¹⁰ And Acc. 11772 helps to put paid to Patrick Bridgwater's assertion that it is Scott's 'ignorance of German pronunciation and orthography' that led him to change the location of 'Greiffenhain' (in Wächter's text) to 'Griefenhaus' in The House of Aspen.¹¹ The vowel sounds 'ei' and 'ie' are distinct in German. From the very beginning of Acc. 11772, however, Scott

⁹ See Raymond Heitz, Le drame de chevalerie dans les pays de langue allemande: fin du XVIII^e et début du XIX^e siècle; theatre, nation et cité (Bern, 1995), 530-610.

¹⁰ See, for example, John Koch, 'Sir Walter Scotts Beziehungen zu Deutschland. II', Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift, xv (1927), 117-41 (121); Duncan M. Mennie, 'Sir Walter Scott's Unpublished Translations of German Plays', MLR xxxiii (1938), 234-39; and G.H. Needler, Goethe and Scott (Toronto, 1950), 26-28.

¹¹ Patrick Bridgwater, The German Gothic Novel in Anglo-German Perspective (Amsterdam and New York, 2013), 112.

writes 'Greiffenhaus'. Indeed, in Beinecke GEN MSS 266 vol. 2 manuscript, Scott's amanuensis spells the word incorrectly, but Scott transcribes the final act, he consistently writes 'Greiffenhaus'. The false orthography is, therefore, a mistake on someone else's part, further down the chain to publication.

After all this, a precise date for the NLS's manuscript of The House of Aspen remains elusive. Acc. 11772 is clearly not a first draft but a later stage in the composition of The House of Aspen that can be dated to around 1800. Even still, it has been forgotten. Aside from recording a stage in the composition of Scott's first full-length work and correcting assumptions about his alleged incompetence with the German language, it is an important document of Scott's engagement with Goethe. Goethe demonstrated his disavowal of classical dramatic categories when he subtitled his 1773 tragedy Götz von Berlichingen 'Ein Schauspiel' instead of 'Trauerspiel' or 'Tragödie'. In the choice of 'a drama of chivalry' over 'a tragedy', this manuscript of The House of Aspen provides a glimpse into Scott's reception of Goethe that moves beyond medievalism and history into the realm of genre.